

Stonehenge still retains its secret

By Linda Laws
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Stonehenge is described by English Heritage as the greatest mystery of the prehistoric world. Some of the surrounding structures were started as long ago as 3000 B.C. and although the great sarsen stones which make up the central feature of the monument are the best known, they form only part of an extensive prehistoric landscape which is filled with the remains of ceremonial and domestic structures. Some of them are older than the great monument itself, including Old Sarum and the Avebury Stone Circles.



Courtesy photo

Stonehenge, begun 5,000 years ago, represents one of the most remarkable achievements of prehistoric engineering.

History of Stonehenge

There are many theories as to why Stonehenge was built, but no one has a definitive answer. Some believe it was built for religious purposes and others for astrological reasons; an observer at the centre of Stonehenge would see the sunrise on the longest day of the year, June 21.

Around 3100 B.C., the original Stonehenge was built. This comprised the bank, the ditch and the Aubrey Holes. At some stage between this time and 2100 B.C., the structure was abandoned. The second phase was started around 2100 B.C. and consisted of two incomplete circles, one inside the other, in the centre of the site. At the same time, the entrance was widened and two pairs of Heel Stones were erected. One hundred years later, the third re-modelling took place. The lintelled circle and horseshoe of Sarsen Stones were constructed (the remains of which are what can be seen today).

Between 2000 B.C. and 1550 B.C., the 20 bluestones were shaped and then erected in an oval setting within the sarsen horseshoe. These stones came from the Preseli moun-

tains in South Wales and were probably moved to the port of Milford Haven and brought by water to the site.

Tools

There were very few tools available at the time. It is believed that the antlers from red deer, and other bones, were used to dig the pits that held the massive stones. Human muscle was used with the aid of ropes, levers and rollers. During the later stages of construction, oxen probably helped, too, as by this time they had become domesticated animals.

Visiting Stonehenge

Stonehenge is open to visitors most of the year. It is closed Dec. 24 - 26. The main opening hours are 9:30 a.m. - 4 p.m. and 9 a.m. - 7 p.m. June - August). Admission is £3.70 for adults, £1.90 for children and £9.00 for a family ticket, which is two adults and up to three children. The site is managed by English Heritage, but National Trust members are admitted free as National Trust owns the land surrounding the site. For more information, call (01980) 624715.

General public access is not allowed into the inner circle. This access is only allowed on special occasions, by applying in advance. Applications must be in writing. The cost is £10 for adults and £5 for children. Special access application forms can be obtained by contacting English Heritage, First Floor, Abbey Buildings, Abbey Square, Amesbury, Wiltshire, SP4 7ES. Access is normally allowed before 9 a.m. or after 4.30 p.m. (7.30 p.m. in the summer) or until dusk. It is not always possible to grant special access, and as much notice as possible should be given when applying.

Old Sarum

This great earthwork was originally built by Iron Age peoples around 500 B.C., but successive settlers and conquerors have also occupied Old Sarum. Here have lived Romans, Saxons and Normans. The Normans made it into one of their major strongholds with a castle and cathedral. Old Sarum faded away in the 13th century when New Sarum came into being. Today, this is known as Salisbury.

It is two miles north of Salisbury, Wiltshire, off the A345. The site is open daily from 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. between March - October, or until dusk in October and from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. between November - March). Admission is £1.90 for adults and £1 for children. The site is maintained by English Heritage. For details, call (01722) 335398.

A battle re-enactment will take place at Old Sarum Aug. 24 - 25, when mounted Norman knights will take on the Saxons.

Avebury Stone Circles

Surrounding the village of Avebury, seven miles west of Marlborough in Wiltshire, lie the remains of the Avebury Stone Circles, constructed 4,000 years ago, and consisting originally of more than 180 stones. Entry to this site is free. It is owned and managed by the National Trust.

The Avebury Museum houses one of the most important prehistoric archaeological collections in Britain. The investigation of Avebury Stone Circles was largely the work of Alexander Keiller; his investigation took place in the 1930s. The museum is open daily between 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. except Dec. 24 - 26 and Jan. 1. Entry is £1.50 for adults and 80p children. Call (01672) 539250 for more information.



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